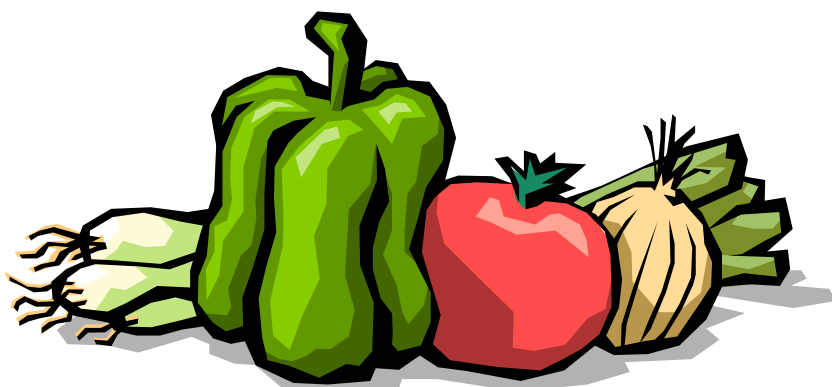


Ending Hunger in Maine



Final Report
of the
Maine Millennium Commission
on
Hunger and Food Security

April 2002

STATE OF MAINE
120th LEGISLATURE
SECOND REGULAR SESSION

FINAL REPORT

of the

MAINE MILLENNIUM COMMISSION

ON

HUNGER AND FOOD SECURITY

April 2002

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For more information: www.stat.me.us/spo/hunger/

Definition of Terms

Food Security. Access by all people at all times to sufficient food for an active and healthy life. Food security includes, at a minimum, the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and an assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Food Insecurity. Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods and/or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

Hunger. The persistent, urgent need for nutrition beyond the control of the person experiencing hunger due to recurrent and involuntary conditions such as lack of income, mobility or access to nutritious food. Though famine, or even severe cases malnutrition, are conditions seen rarely in this country, milder forms of malnutrition, chronic under nutrition and cyclical hunger are common.

Chronic Under nutrition is the consumption of fewer calories and protein than is needed by the body over a long period of time and a deficiency of vitamins and minerals needed for vital health. It often occurs in families where poverty is a chronic problem and there is inadequate income to provide for the basic needs of the household on an ongoing basis.

Malnutrition is the lack of specific vitamins and minerals needed for vital health. Lack of foods rich in calcium for proper bone development, or of vitamin rich fresh fruits and vegetables are the most common causes of vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

Cyclical hunger is caused by monthly, seasonal, or annual variances in production or access to food. It often occurs in families where income is unsteady or fluctuates seasonally with economic or occupational conditions or with the health or presence/absence of wage earners in the home. Cycles of hunger occur when households are forced to choose between food and heat, food and medicine, food and housing, and/or food and child care.

Hunger, End of. The State of Maine is considered hunger free when the annual USDA food security measure finds for more than two consecutive years that 96% of households in Maine are food secure and no households are experiencing hunger. The threshold is set at 96% because social and economic circumstances are such that some risk of hunger will always be present as changes in household structure, health conditions, employment situation, and other related circumstances cause interruptions in income, mobility, and access to adequate amounts of nutritious food.

Nutrition Security. The provision of an environment that encourages and motivates society to make food choices consistent with short and long term good health.

How the USDA Measures Hunger

In Maine, nearly one in ten persons is food insecure according to the USDA.

The USDA measures the food security status of each household along a continuum that extends from complete food security at one end to severe hunger at the other end. The continuum is divided into three ranges:

1. Food secure
2. Food insecure without hunger
3. Food insecure with hunger (further divided into “moderate” and “severe”).

Each household’s location on the continuum is assessed by their response to a series of 18 questions about behaviors and experiences known to characterize households having difficulty meeting their food needs. Some of the questions include:

1. Is this statement often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months? “We worried whether our food would run out before we got money to buy more.”
2. Is this statement often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 12 months? “We couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.”
3. In the last 12 months, did you ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food?
4. In the last 12 months did any of the children ever skip a meal because there wasn’t enough money for food?
5. In the last 12 months did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough food?

Households answering yes to 3 or more of the 18 core questions were classified as “food insecure”.

The three least severe conditions that lead to a classification of “food insecure” are:

1. They worried about whether their food would run out before they had money to buy more.
2. The food they bought didn’t last and they didn’t have money to get more.
3. They couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.

Households classified as “food insecure with hunger” reported at a minimum all of the above and that:

1. Adults ate less than they felt they should.
2. Adults cut the size of meals or skipped meals and did so in 3 or more months.
3. These questions were also asked about children if children were in the household.

Households classified as “food insecure with severe hunger reported additional indicators of reduced food intake among adults, such as going for whole days without eating as well as multiple indicators of reduced food intake among children if there are any in the household.

Executive Summary

Thousands of Maine citizens lack food security. Many go hungry for periods of time. In recent years a vast network of services have developed to alleviate hunger among the State's neediest citizens. These programs, though essential, represent an astounding investment of time, dollars, public and private efforts, and involve nearly every sector of the food production and distribution system and social service delivery systems, yet serve merely to alleviate hunger on a day to day basis, not to end hunger.

The Maine Millennium Commission on Hunger and Food Security has spent the last two years examining what must be done to end hunger in Maine. The Commission has learned that the road to ending hunger is not straight or simple. Rather, ending hunger requires substantive changes in society's attitude toward hunger, in our social and economic systems and our food producing and delivery systems, and in public policy.

Hunger, even in its mild forms, has a profound and lasting effect on growth and development, mental alertness, overall health and well being, productivity, and on one's sense of worth and dignity. One person who submitted testimony to a hearing of the Blue Ribbon Commission on Hunger and Food Security in 1996 summed up the situation simply but eloquently: "There is no dignity in having to accept a handout. To avoid it people take risks that endanger their health and even their lives."

Hunger is much more than a hungry person. Although hunger occurs as an individual phenomenon, its impact affects and diminishes the lives of everyone in the community. It is much more than a social problem or a condition of poverty. If we are to end hunger we must "get out of this box" and see hunger for what it is and how it affects all aspects of our lives and the very social and economic fabric of our state and our nation.

The Commission has chosen to lay out a strategy that focuses on long term food security, on ending rather than temporarily alleviating hunger. This strategy includes recommendations of immediate steps needed, a list of additional steps that must be taken to maintain momentum, and the creation of a structure to ensure steady progress toward ending Hunger in Maine.

Key Premises



Hunger costs us all and diminishes us all.



Hunger is much more than a “social problem”. To address hunger comprehensively, we must learn to think in different ways with entirely new perspectives and objectives. The aim should be to end hunger, not simply treat the symptoms of hunger.



We CAN end hunger in Maine.



People who are facing hunger are part of the solution.

Key Findings



1. Maine must resolve to end hunger and ensure food security for every resident of the State.

It is in our interest to do so because the payoff is great – a healthier citizenry, better educated society, healthier and more productive workforce, and ultimately, vastly reduced costs in both monetary and societal terms.



2. Maine must make the problem of Hunger in Maine central to all public policy debates and decisions.

Hunger is typically perceived as a social problem or as a manifestation of poverty. It is in fact much more and has far reaching implications for many other aspects of the quality of life in Maine. The relationship between hunger and learning, hunger and job performance, hunger and health and health care costs, are all well established and debates and decisions relating to these

issues and others must acknowledge precisely the role hunger plays because it impacts on virtually every aspect of our collective well-being.



3. The lack of economic security is a key factor contributing to hunger in Maine.

Nearly a third of Maine workers do not earn a living wage that meets the basic needs for a family of three. As the Maine economy slows or transforms itself, mass layoffs in some sectors of the economy are creating great uncertainty. For those unable to participate in the workforce, the elderly, disabled, and those with special needs or very small children, the programs and services available to them rarely provide a standard of living that is even at or above the poverty line.



4. The link between a healthier diet for Maine citizens and the vitality of Maine farms has been largely overlooked in past attempts to address the problem of hunger.

As a result, Maine's potential to produce is not being reached. The vitality of Maine farms is undermined, farmland is being lost at an unacceptable rate, and a way of life is in jeopardy.

The structure of our food system has evolved in such a manner that few people today consider the value of purchasing locally produced food either in the supermarket or at the farm. Few are aware of where their food comes from or how it is produced, and few know how to access locally grown farm food products. The diets of Maine citizens have become dominated by processed and convenience foods and by foods of diminished nutritional value due to having spent as much as several weeks in the pipeline when local fresh, healthy, and affordable alternatives are available.



5. Our institutions and systems must acknowledge that changing life styles, changing needs of society as Maine's population ages, and a changing food system and technology have revolutionized what we eat and how food is prepared, and must respond with appropriate nutrition information, fundamental institutional changes, and a new array of services and systems to meet present and future needs.

Far too many Maine children go to school hungry, not only because of poverty and lack of food in the household, but also because many parents either lack time to prepare a balanced breakfast for their children or have already left for work themselves. Senior citizens face special problems due to declining mobility, isolation, loneliness, and failing health that affect appetite, energy level, and access to food. Our busy lifestyle leaves many households relying on processed and packaged foods that can be quickly heated in the microwave, and on snack foods and other items that can be eaten on the run. The level of consumer exposure to nutrition information,

suggestions of alternative foods that are healthier, locally produced, and easily prepared has been far too little.



6. **The dignity of Maine citizens has all too often been compromised by the current systems used to deliver services.** We must put in place a seamless system of services for those who are unable on their own to obtain adequate nutrition or adequate income to ensure access to safe and nutritious food that ensures all are provided for adequately and with dignity.



7. **Maine's systems to address, promote and enhance food production, food security, the alleviation of hunger through temporary services, and the provision of nutritional information are fragmented and uncoordinated.**

Maine needs an Office of Food Security to coordinate and enhance the many initiatives and efforts of state government and the private sector, and to monitor the State's progress toward achieving food security for all its citizens.

Key Recommendations

Many actions are suggested in the pages that follow. However, the Commission believes the following short list of recommendations to be immediately needed and presents them as the commission's top priority for ending hunger.



1. The problem of Hunger in Maine must be made central to a wide range of public policy debates and decisions. It must become the policy of the State of Maine to end hunger.



2. Maine must take steps to achieve a living wage for all its citizens.

Maine must act to increase the income of its citizens through higher wages, adoption of a fair tax structure that takes smaller tax bite from the incomes of lower and moderate income working families, and an improved economic climate that will help small businesses compete on a level field with larger businesses and that will enable and strengthen their capacity to participate in programs and provide benefits normally accessible only to larger firms.



3. Maine must make structural changes in the food system to ensure locally produced food is more easily available to all citizens throughout the state and to increase local food consumption and to ensure that Maine makes measurable movement toward greater food self reliance.



4. Maine must recognize that significant social and demographic changes have a profound effect on the nutritional needs of its citizenry. Maine must move toward a universal school nutrition program for all Maine children, begin to put in place the systems that will accommodate a growing elderly population as the baby boom reaches retirement age over the coming decades, and provide improved information on nutritional values and food preparation means compatible with the fast paced life styles of today's working households.













5. Maine must ensure a seamless system of services and programs for those who are in need by making sure that where the parameters and requirements of one program leave off, the eligibility for another take up, closing all gaps through which populations in need may fall.



6. An Office of Food Security is necessary to coordinate the many fragmented activities that relate to ending hunger in Maine.

Specific Immediate Actions

-  1. Resolve to end hunger in Maine.
-  2. Establish an office of food security.
-  3. Increase the earned income tax credit and make it refundable.
-  4. Begin the move toward a school nutrition program available without cost to every child.
-  5. Institute a “free cart” program of breakfast or morning snacks in the schools immediately.
-  6. Make the school nutrition program an integral part of the educational process in Maine schools.
-  7. Ensure interim funding for the Senior FarmShare Program and expand the program to other low and moderate income households over a period of time.
-  8. Close loopholes in the state bid process and create opportunities for small businesses to improve opportunities and benefits for their workers.
-  9. Examine Maine’s tax system to ensure that low-income households do not pay a disproportionate share.
-  10. Require all State agencies and departments to review their services and program guidelines to ensure a seamless system.

Legislation proposed to implement these actions are attached in the appendix.

Key Areas for Consistency in Public Policy

1. Maine must build a strong link between education policy and school nutrition programs.
 - a. Make it the policy of the State of Maine to provide school nutrition services without cost in all Maine schools in order to eliminate the stigma suffered by children under the current fee system.
 - b. The policy and budget development processes of local school districts should reflect the role of nutrition in the learning and nurturing of children and should include the School Nutrition Program as an integral part of the education experience for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds.
2. In order to stabilize and increase the disposable income of Maine families and households, Maine should move with urgency to ensure that Maine has:
 - a. A comprehensive energy policy that protects citizens from volatile prices, ensures a stable, secure and affordable energy supply and that reduces dependence on non-renewable resources;
 - b. A comprehensive health care program for all that ensures affordable health care and prescription drug coverage; and
 - c. An affordable housing policy for Maine.
3. In order to ensure that Maine families have access to employment that affords a living wage, Maine should move with urgency to ensure that Maine has:
 - a. Quality, safe, affordable, and nurturing child care within access of all working families;
 - b. Expanded services to assist low income households purchase a vehicle where needed;
 - c. An improved and expanded public transportation system to accommodate changing work patterns and schedules;
 - d. Support for smaller businesses to improve worker skills; and
 - e. Lifelong learning opportunities available to every citizen.

4. Maine must recognize the link between of community, economic development and land use policies and food production and availability.

- a. Develop a comprehensive policy on farmland and farming that will stop the erosion of family farms by preserving and protecting the infrastructure as well as the land and farms.
- b. Establish a state policy and proper planning and land use tools to protect farmland from encroachment, support farms by exempting them from “commercial uses” criteria, reducing the effects of sprawl pressures, and shielding farmland from the effect of rising taxes associated with development.